Letter from Taizé

Living the Council of Youth

Quarterly Letter N° 25 February 1976

GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL UNION

It will have taken some two years for the celebrations of the Council of Youth to unfold in the different continents.

Two years which have given birth to suggestions of great force. So, at Taizé, on Easter evening, a new period will begin.

MAY 10 1976

Breath of Christ's loving,

breath of burning fire,

come and kindle our hearts' desert.

Flame through and through.

Melt whatever rebels

before the mystery of communion in you.

Brother Roger

Council celebration in Douala (Cameroun)

Coming « from the four winds », young people and adults from Cameroun and twelve other countries met at Douala, from December 26th to 28th, for the first African celebration of the Council of Youth.

The celebration was a sign and fruit of a process that began in 1971. Through meetings and the creation of small groups of sharing, prayer and reflection, a great number of people in Cameroun grew in awareness and were led to become involved through ever more concrete commitments.

The Preparation

The celebration was preceded by days of reflection in different neighborhoods of Douala : poor neighborhoods with unpaved roads, hazardous for vehicles, and low-lying houses, neighborhoods which keep spreading out as people flow in from the countryside.

A week beforehand, the "strangers" who had come from outside Douala were welcomed into families and parishes, Protestant and Catholic, sharing in their daily living. All celebrated Christmas together amidst traditional dances and songs. Every day the newcomers met with neighborhood groups, young people working in parishes, teaching catechism, involved in different movements. Three texts served as a basis for reflection ; one had originally been issued by the bishops of Chile, but it seemed to have been written specially for the occasion !

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The times of reflection in common, held in the simple ocal chapel, often drew to an end under the light of an il-lamp. In all its diversity, the People of God was there : nce-warring ethnic groups, sidewalk pedlars, students, vorkers, those out of work.

« In our group we talked about barriers. Someone said that he had noticed iat each house in the district was surrounded by a barrier, everyone wishing close himself in along with his property. We wondered if the barriers ere only a matter of appearances, or if they are real barriers which create eep divisions even in people's hearts, making any contact impossible. »

« We met a well-organized neighborhood group of about sixty women. They elp each other out. One teaches sewing to those who don't know how, others each child-rearing, embroidering or knitting. Any woman at all can be a iember ; there is no discrimination. One of their purposes it to meet for rayer and sharing around the Gospel. »

he Celebration

December 26th, everybody came together in one place. The three days of celebration were centered around times f common prayer (Scripture readings, intercessions, songs nd individual presentations) alternating with small roups for discussion and reflection. The young people rom Cameroun who were responsible for organizing the elebration found four themes that expressed what was nost important for them now and for the future. These ecame the themes for the times of prayer together :

Remove our masks. Our masks keep us from being onest with others. Why be afraid to take them off ? Christ knows what is in my heart". He gives his own strength nd opens up a way of confidence and trust.

« Peace and freedom in the world will become possible only if we all try o unmask ourselves and show our real faces, the face of beauty, the face of Christ that is within us. These days everyone wants to dominate, to exploit heir brothers and sisters as much as they can (...). The modern world is uffering from superficiality. We judge others by their outward appearances, ve confuse what we are with what we do. »

« In certain industries here in Cameroun, we have noticed that salary increases are really just a means of keeping down workers' anger over increased taxes. This allows those on top to steal two or even three times the amount of the increases (...).

These masks between groups of people extend even to the international sphere : on the pretext of a so-called economic cooperation, the rich countries get richer at the expense of the poor countries. If this mask did not exist how could we explain the fact that Africa is the continent richest in natural resources, and yet the poorest part of the globe today ? »

The weight of our lives. The weight of suffering, of misery, of injustice crushes me. But Christ has already travelled this road and he walks it today along with us.

« December 25, Christmas Day, we decided to go visit those who are most unfortunate, who suffer the most : children in the hospital afflicted with smallpox, chicken-pox, all sorts of contagious diseases. We sang songs of praise to God around the beds of these suffering children. In a nearby corridor some prisoners lay stretched out. They were suffering. A few days before the prison had been disinfected. Covered with sores, these young prisoners thought they could cure themselves by rubbing their sores with the disinfectant. Instead, they were poisoned. Some of them had not been treated for two or three days. The next day we learned that more than ten of them had died. In the face of God's silence, we are sometimes tempted to lose our faith. But the weight of our lives surely counts in God's eyes. We must keep on trusting in him. »

Stand up. Our efforts to rise up are already signs of hope. Where do we get this new blood, this new energy that enables us to keep on ?

« One day a friend came to see me. I took one look at him, and there was no need for him to tell me his troubles. He was skin and bones, almost starving. I had just enough money myself to get through the month. I said to myself : if I give him some money, in a few days I'll look like he does now. I was going to tell him I couldn't help him. But I thought : Christ asks me not to worry about what I'm going to eat tomorrow, and to love my neighbor as myself. I gave him half of my money, without worrying about what would become of me. »

Church : Salt of the earth, Light of the world. Together each of us committed in their own way, we become leaven hidden in the dough, ferment of communion in the People of God.

« The Church has to become poor in order to be accessible to everyone. Christ chose to be born in a stable so that he could be the poorest of all, so that no one would be ashamed to approach him. Likewise, the Church exists for all humanity. She has to present a face which attracts, not which keeps people away, or else some people will not be able to approach her.

Sharing is only possible in a situation of poverty. For a long time we have been criticizing Europeans for being self-centered. The problem was that they were not poor enough, their riches killed any desire to share with others. The black man has always been considered the symbol of hospitality. Our poverty is responsible for this. We have nothing, and yet we share this nothing with all. We are not preoccupied with material concerns ; what is most important for us is to see those around us happy.

As young people, we will be responsible for the Church of tomorrow and it is up to us to make her be what she should, what people expect of her, to make her perfect. »

The bishop of Douala told the participants of his joy in welcoming the Council of Youth to his town. He recalled that, from the beginning of his time as bishop, "ecumenism has always been an important part of his program as pastor in such a cosmopolitan city".

The necklace of Douala

Sunday during the Mass, the high point of the celebration, the prayer over the offerings was particularly significant. Following a liturgical dance, several young people presented the fruits of their labour, whether in the fields or in town. Then a youth presented what was to become almost the symbol of the celebration, a necklace, and explained to everybody what it represented :

"We created it all together, each person adding the bead of their choice. But what does this piece of jewelry signify for us ?

From their infancy Africans float in a world of symbols. One of them is the necklace : wrapped around our wrists as babies ; attached to our waists by Mother as

children ; later on, we wear it around the neck. It is a sign of protection for the wearer. At the same time it is an ornament.

This common object is a good image of what we want to be, and what we already are : the Church, people of God!

The necklace is composed of a central thread which passes through the beads at their center. Each bead has its own colour and only the central cord causes all to stay together and form a unity. From far away, you see a succession of different colours. But this beautiful whole is destroyed if the thread breaks. Likewise, if one bead breaks the beauty of the entire necklace suffers.

The People of God that we wish to form with our lives is like that : our thread, our guide, is Christ ; each one of us, each individual, is a bead, nothing by itself and finding meaning only in and through Christ.

To sum up : this necklace symbolizes our desire for unity, equality, complementarity, brotherhood in Christ. All of us belong to the same central thread (if the thread gets tangled, the necklace is ruined), yet each keeps their own originality and enriches the whole, ever-changing and diversified in Christ : the People of God where all are in One Alone.

It is God with men, God among men, God in man : and that is Emmanuel.

All of us will leave, some across Cameroun, some across Africa, some across the world. But this concrete separation is only part of the story : in this necklace we are strong, because we are centered on Christ who is like the thread that unites us."

News

A Council of Youth meeting will take place in ARGENTINA, at a Benedictine monastery in Victoria, from February 28th to March 2nd. The main topic of this meeting, in these difficult days for Argentina, will be the theme of a recent document issued by the bishops of the country : « The risen Christ, present in history and among men. » The reflection will be based on certain Biblical texts :

God present in the people (Exodus 3 and 19).

God calls and confers a mission (Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1).

As the Church, what kind of community are we called to form ? (Acts 2, 42-47 and 4, 32-37).

Another Council of Youth meeting will be held at Aguascalientes, MEXICO, at Easter. The participants will come from throughout the country. They will reflect on what it means to live the Easter experience of death and resurrection today in the concrete historical situation of Latin America.

Following the suppression of the Committee for Peace in CHILE, someone currently travelling there writes :

« After the initial moments of suffering, the Church here has experienced moments of rare intensity, centered in the mystery of Christ. The poorest people are in dire straits. Some have lost all hope. All must struggle to survive, to give their children some bread to eat. But there is a real sense of solidarity — the people of Chile are just amazing. »

Number 11 of the journal COMMUNION will be out soon under the title « Crown of Life ». The issue is a tool to continue a form of reflection begun last summer at Taizé. It contains the reflections of several people who took part in the « research units » during the summer. Along with them, the reader can first investigate the general direction in which his life is heading, then look more closely at three dimensions of existence : faith, work, and Church. And finally, a Biblical reflection will allow him to view his own existence in the light of the Word of God.

A young Indonesian involved in the Council of Youth has just completed a time of travelling from village to village, on the islands of Java and Sumatra, in INDONESIA. Here are some extracts from his letters :

MALANG - SURABAYA. — Living in a town is harder than in a village, so the people in town must struggle more cruelly for their lives. Those who succeed in the struggle get luxurious houses, delicious meals, fine clothes, but those who are weak have no place to stay, not enough food. Each person looks for his own profit without seeing someone else's suffering. The gap between the rich and poor becomes deeper and deeper. Factories are full of labourers with low salaries...

BLITAR. — I found young people screaming out against problems like urbanisation, forced marriage, broken homes, getting married too young, corruption, intimidation, overcrowded populations in Java... They realise the problems but they don't know what they can do for overcoming them. They feel very weak and useless. Having heard about the opening of the Council of Youth their hearts open. They know that they are not alone, they are not weak because they are together with all the people in the world. They really begin to think over what they can do for improving the situation. They are ready to conscientise their neighbours...

KRESNAWIDODO. — A poor widow said to me : « My husband died fourteen years ago. I sold all my possessions at my former village in East Java. But the money that I got was only enough for my travel here to Sumatra, with my two daughters. When I came I stayed with the family nearby. A few months later some young people arranged wood and grass for my cottage. I never supposed before that people here love me. Yesterday I did not have supper because I remembered my only brother who still lives in East Java. When I was going to bite fried chicken I said to myself : 'My brother is old, he cannot work, he has nothing — but I eat a delicious meal.' (Actually I never eat chicken, but yesterday was a feast day of Idul Fitri). »

The first Asian celebration of the Council of Youth is in preparation for this coming September, in BANGLA DESH. It will be followed by other celebrations in different Asian lands. Right now, a journey of visits and contacts to Singapore, New Zealand, Australia and Indonesia is taking place. People are also travelling in the Philippines and in India.

In Nairobi (Kenya)

Two brothers of Taizé took part in the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, from November 0th to December 15th, in Nairobi (Kenya). They did not tay in the europeanised section of the city, but instead hared the shack of a young Muslim in a poor neighborood.

A nearby shack was occupied for two months by the mall team travelling through East Africa for the Council f Youth : an English girl, a French girl, and two boys, ne from Cameroun and one from Indonesia. Jacques from ameroun tells what their daily life was like :

« The most striking thing about Nairobi is the contrast etween the center and the poor neighborhood where we tayed in a simple shack. The center doesn't seem African. t's much more European in style. Full of buildings fifteen o twenty-eight stories high. Beautiful gardens everywhere ou look. The poor districts are just the opposite : shacks hat barely remain standing, roofs made of everything ou can think of — pieces of paper, wood, sheet iron, rags, eld down by large stones. Crowded to overflowing : an verage of fifteen people per shack. In a vain attempt to orget their cares and the misery all around, everybody rinks a sort of homemade liquor. And then there are he 'parking boys', young kids six to fifteen years old, overed with sores, miserable. They are abandoned, left n their own at an early age. In Nairobi you need at east two blankets to sleep inside at night, but these poor kids sleep in the open covered only by a few pieces of cardboard.

During the day, I worked with some youngsters in a raining-center. One of the girls worked in a nearby slum, he other remained at home to welcome people. Octa, the ndonesian, worked with about forty 'parking boys' who

had been brought together by a priest, a true witness of th Gospel. Evenings, for all four of us as well as for the tw brothers who joined us, were always a time of welcoming Many friends stopped by, young people, neighbors, an also lots of delegates of different nationalities who ha come to Nairobi for the World Council gathering. Some times there were 150 of us. Our house couldn't hold mor than twenty-five, so we gathered everybody outside i front of the house. Every evening we shared soup an prayer with everyone, and it was always festive. On evening, a Russian bishop told us that at Nairobi we wer the Pilgrim and we were living like the early Christians.

Sent out by twos

Leaving Taizé many have wondered : how to live a home the communion discovered, and how to give suppor to each other ? The most natural form of support seem to be through mutual visits. Many wish to receive such visits. So over the past few months people have been com ing together in different parts of Europe in order to wel come others.

These visits are not made only to youth groups Parishes and Christian communities are also visited, so a to discover and support the life — so often hidden — o the whole People of God.

The important thing is not to talk about the Counci of Youth, but to discover together what we mean when

ve speak of the dead and risen Christ. To spend time pray-ng together, to consider what it means to live the Beatitud-s in one's every day situation, to develop a sense of "being people", to share difficulties and joys.

The visits are made by young people sent out by twos, fter having participated in weekends of preparation at Taizé. Here some of them tell what they experienced, even hough they know that the essential cannot be expressed n words.

Marlene (Switzerland) : What can visits accomplish ? Encouraging one another, listening to others, discovering he universal dimension of the Church. Often visits to those who live nearby are more fruitful than visits to other countries. Have the visits that have already taken place been centered on the meaning of Easter ? I think so — through sharing our hopes, our joy in the Church, our songs, our commitments...

Liz (Great Britain) : One of a series of small meetings held during my journey in England with Xavier from India took place in a densely-populated district of London where people in a parish are trying to share their lives in a way which contrasts strongly with the tensions around them. It is an area where two-thirds of the inhabitants are immigrants — the majority from the West Indies —, with low-income families, a housing shortage and much sub-standard housing, continual conflict between the black and the white populations, much unemployment amongst the black youth and an increasing fear of violence. The parish — a small group — accepts to live with these tensions and tries simply to be a place of meeting ; each night the church is open for young people looking for somewhere to go. For the weekend each of the several visitors was welcomed by a different family and shared in their daily prayer-life. The focal point of the weekend was the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday and the meal we

shared together afterwards. It was a coming together of differently committed people during which we confirmed each other in our concrete task and during which we opened ourselves a little more to the universality of the People of God.

Brigitte (France) : Recently, as part of several two-person teams, I made a number of visits to large cities in souhern and western France : Marseille, Nîmes, St. Malo, etc. I met very deeply-committed groups who no longer felt part of the Church, and others for whom knowing they were supported by the communion of the Church was very important in enabling them to persevere.

For example, there was that housing-project in Nîmes where I spent a few days : 10,000 residents, the majority foreigners, unemployed or with menial jobs. There are no playgrounds for the children, nor structures to enable them to get an education. Right in the midst of this oppressive atmosphere, a small Christian community forms a tiny island of welcome and meeting. The community has no relations with the parishes of the city center, and so for them our visit was a way of renewing links of communion within the Church.

At St. Malo the visit was different : total participation in the life of a parish. I took part in a day of reflection on prayer, along with both young people and adults. Without having to express it in words, we all felt strongly that we were members of the same Church, seeking together what it means to be a Christian today. For all concerned, the visit reinforced our conviction that we are not alone in our searching.

Jean (France) : In the course of several visits, some people were surprised that we just wanted to share a moment of their existence. They felt that their life was not worth the trouble. For some priests especially, it was

real surprise to find young people who were interested n their daily lives : religious instruction, pastoral con- erences, etc. For these priests it was like re-discovering hat their vocation was meaningful. Especially for some vho, after much reflection, had decided to continue serv- ng, despite the fact that many of their friends had given ıp any form of ministry.

Peter (Netherlands) : Last summer many people from Holland came to Taizé, and they were concerned not to ose during the winter the contacts that had been built ıp. The idea came up of organizing small gatherings in ach province. This would be a means of keeping in touch nd encouraging one another, and of moving toward a ealistic participation in the life of the People of God. These small gatherings were held in parishes "where omething is happening", where the Church is alive. As ve took part in one meeting after another, we came to grasp something of the "people of the Beatitudes".

Each meeting began with a Biblical text, for example he Beatitudes, as a way of looking at each one's concrete ituation. But we also set aside many times for silent prayer and festival.

Being welcomed into parishes made it possible to discuss the life of the Church in addition to other questions. These exchanges often resulted in new ideas. We came to realize that we belong to the same people, with each bearing a share of the responsibility.

... *(Asia) :* Two weekends spent visiting parishes in Holland revealed to me concrete examples of Christian community. In these meetings, people young and old told us how they were attempting to live the "little something" they had grasped of the Gospel.

As one woman said in Hengelo : "Our family has tried to open our home to those who need someone to listen to

them. I'm tired of living a life closed to others, caring nothing for neighbours whom I meet every day. The Gospel sets me free to go this way without turning back."

While many speak of alienation in European societies I was surprised to discover a lot of personal spontaneity in these groups trying so hard to put the Gospel into practice.

Geneva (USA) and Gothart (Germany) : During our two weeks of travel in southern Germany we made the university town of Tübingen our home. There we met frequently with a group of students who come together for prayer three times a week. Last year these students pooled their money so that one of them could go to the Council of Youth celebration in Santa Cecilia, Mexico. Through the travel of this one person, all of them were able to be present at the celebration and to know of the struggles and hopes of people in Latin America. Now they continue the contact begun at Santa Cecilia by exchanging letters with a Mexican who is part of a team working for the conscientisation of peasants in the countryside. Geneva often shared some of her experiences of living for three years in a black neighborhood of Philadelphia with the people of Temple Church, where there was also a Council of Youth celebration last year. And we added to this news of people we had met in the Tübingen area, as well as of those whom we knew elsewhere. Hearing of the commitment of others helps us to discover a complementarity in the People of God which encourages each of us to continue in our own places.

Isabelle (France) and Xavier (India) : We spent ten days at Genoa (Italy), visiting many groups and parish communities. Almost everywhere, people understood why we were visiting : to make a gesture of friendship just by being together with them, sharing their lives, their sufferings, to be a link of communion in the People of God. We

net many groups of Christians full of vitality, looking for ew life-styles, on their way to becoming real communities f sharing. We found hope in the fact that these com- nunities are often made up of young and older people, and ven entire families, and that at times they find concrete ways of being in relation with certain Church structures. n a country like Italy where the complex and often tense nternal situation is on everybody's minds, we were struck o see how strong the desire was to find out what is hap- ening in other parts of the world.

Easter at Taizé

The Easter meeting will take place from *Friday evening, April 16, at 8 PM* (Prayer of the Cross) to *Monday morning, April 19.*

Those who wish to spend all of Holy Week in silence reflecting on the mystery of the crucified and risen Christ are welcome to come Monday, April 12.

LES PRESSES DE TAIZÉ
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THE NEXT INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS AT TAIZÉ

Dates : — every week, from Monday evening to the following Sunday afterno

EASTER MEETING : April 16 - 19.

Please remember to write announcing yo arrival ! Then the work of welcoming a feeding you is easier.

Age : 18 years and older (a meeting for people between 15 and 17 years age will take place June 19 - 20).

Costs : Everyone contributes as they can ; reckon with a basic cost (fo and all) of between 12 and 18 francs per day.

Lodging : In personal tents or large dormitory-tents. Bring sleeping bag, blanke air mattress. If possible a tent.

Silence and solitude : At any date young people can come and spend a f days of more intensive silence away from the others.

Registration to be sent to : MEETINGS, 71460 - Taizé-Community, France

Name :

First Name :

Address :

(with zip-code and country)

Occupation : ..... Age : ....

Will take part in the meeting from ..... to .....

Will bring own tent : No-Y

I receive the *Letter from Taizé :* No-Y

I would like to receive the *Letter from Taizé :* No-Y

Can be part of reflexion-groups in italian — german — french — english spanish — portuguese — dutch — swedish.

Can undertake simultaneous translation from ..... into .....

Need .... more registration forms / Information material.